



NEWSLETTER

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF THE MILITARY



DEADLINE APPROACHING FOR DISABLED VETERAN TAX PROGRAM

The November 1, 2021, deadline for eligible disabled veterans to apply for property tax relief is approaching.

The South Dakota Department of Revenue's Disabled Veteran's Program exempts the first \$150,000 of valuation on an eligible applicant's property. The program also applies to surviving spouses of disabled veterans if they have not remarried. Once approved, this exemption will automatically continue until the property changes ownership or is not owner-occupied.

To qualify for the program, applicants must meet both of the following criteria:

- The veteran must be rated as permanently and totally disabled as a result of a service-connected disability.
- The veteran or a surviving spouse, who is not remarried, must own and occupy the property.

Applicants will be required to provide proof of their eligibility to receive the exemption, which may be obtained by calling the Sioux Falls VA Regional Office at 1-800-827-1000.

If approved, applicants will receive their first reduction in their property taxes payable in 2023. Applications can be accessed from their county Director of Equalization or on the Department of Revenue's website at:

<https://dor.sd.gov/individuals/taxes/property-tax/relief-programs/#veterans>.

If you have questions, feel free to call Department of Revenue Property Tax Agents at 1-800-829-9188 (Option 2).

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BRIDGE DEDICATIONS

This past week, South Dakotans gathered in Brookings and Parkston to honor two more of state's great heroes!

On Friday, October 8, the South Dakota HWY 14 Bypass Bridge over the east branch of Six Mile Creek, near Brookings, was dedicated in honor of U.S. Army Air Corps Combat Veteran Captain Elmer Rusch.

Rusch graduated from South Dakota State University in 1941 and was commissioned as an officer through their ROTC program. In June of 1944 he was stationed in England with the 101st Airborne Division and was part of the glider force participating in the D-Day invasion. He was killed in action when his glider landed in a field completely covered by German fire.

On Monday, October 11, The South Dakota Pony Creek Bridge near Parkston was dedicated to U.S. Army Air Force Combat Veteran Sergeant William Christensen.

Christensen was killed in action April 8, 1944, when he left with two Army bombers in the 491st Bomb Squadron and 341st Bomb Group. They were attacked by seven Japanese planes off the southeast coast of Hainan in China.

The next bridge dedication will be held November 11 in Alexandria in honor of U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Gregory Wagner.



VA PREPARES TO GET AHEAD OF SURGE IN BACKLOGGED CLAIMS

Starting in October, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs will hire and train new staff to ensure veterans' claims are adjudicated quickly and help reduce an expected increase in the backlog of claims pending more than 125 days.

The VA is taking the following proactive steps to help in the reduction:

- Hire and train 2,000 new employees to assist in claims processing.
- Leverage authority to transfer CARES funding to the Veterans Benefits Administration and utilize the American Rescue Plan to fund overtime to ensure timely claims processing.
- Deploy requested fiscal year 2022 budget resources to support Agent Orange presumptive processing, as well as for general Compensation and Pension claims processing.

As of October 11, there were more than 204,000 backlog claims in an inventory of 603,000 total claims. The VA identified more than 70,000 claims to review for additional entitlement stemming from the presumptive relationship between Agent Orange and Parkinsonism, bladder cancer, and hypothyroidism. Many of these will enter the backlog in October which is projected to reach 260,000 pending claims.

"The VA is committed to ensuring timely access to benefits and services for all veterans. This includes making sure veterans who may have experienced adverse health effects from military related exposures can get access to the benefits they need," said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. "As we process claims such as those for three new disabilities presumptively linked to Agent Orange exposure, including proactive application of Nehmer provisions, as well as three new Gulf War particulate exposure presumptives, we anticipate the claims backlog to increase this fall. The hiring of new employees will help us resolve these claims more quickly."

Several factors have contributed to the recent backlog. Beginning in March 2020, operational changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an untimely delay of the Federal Records Centers' retrieval of documents and suspended Compensation and Pension examinations. While these actions were necessary to protect the health and safety of employees and veterans, they slowed the processing time for claims. The VA workload has also increased as a result of the aforementioned recent decisions and actions, including a court order mandating the review of previously denied veterans on the basis of qualifying service in the 12 nautical miles surrounding Vietnam.

The backlog has decreased by more than 14,000 claims since the end of August 2021. With continued improvement of VA's ability to obtain C&P examinations and Federal Records, and with all requested resources received, VBA plans to address the impending increase and then further reduce the current claims backlog to 100,000 claims by April 2024.

Learn more about claims and to view reports visit [Detailed Claims Data](#).

STATE VETERANS HOME UPDATE

The South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs is proud to announce that the Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home earned an overall Five Star rating from Medicare. A five-star rating is considered excellent. The overall rating is based on a nursing home's performance on three sources: health inspections, staffing, and quality of resident care measures.

"We are proud of our team at the State Veterans Home," said Greg Whitlock, secretary of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs. "Their commitment and dedication to enhance the lives of our heroes is appreciated and we applaud their successes."

The State Veterans Home has been notified they are the recipients of the "2021 Exceptional Business Partner" award. This award will be presented to the Home during Western Dakota Technical College's upcoming 4th Annual Legends and Legacy Gala.



SDDVA PARTICIPATES IN CHOW LINE

Last Friday, SDDVA had the opportunity to be a partner at Operation Chow Line in Watertown.

Veterans and military personnel attending the event had the opportunity to visit with this great trio comprised of Codington County VSO Todd Rose, SDDVA Secretary Greg Whitlock, and Special Events Coordinator Guy Arnold.

Outreach events such as Operation Chow Line affords SDDVA and our partners, the opportunity to visit with veterans and their families about benefits and their unique needs.



VA IMPROVES QUALITY OF CARE FOR VETERANS DIAGNOSED WITH ALS

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs, through a recent partnership, is working to increase the number of clinics certified by the ALS Association as a Treatment Center of Excellence.

The alliance aims to improve care for veterans diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis — and increase awareness of [resources](#) and treatment options available.

ALS is a progressive neurodegenerative disease affecting nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. While there are no known cures, treatment options can reduce damage caused by the disease, relieve symptoms and improve one's quality of life. Research shows those who served in the military are more likely to develop ALS than those who have not.

"ALS Association's continuing education resources give VA health care providers and patients access to educational opportunities," said

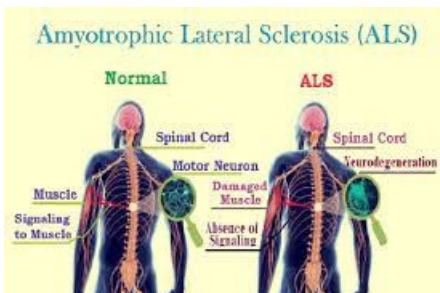
VA [National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships](#) Nurse Executive Tracy L. Weistreich, Ph.D. "By promoting local participation in nationwide chapters, we ensure veterans have greater access to ALS programs and services at the VA and in their communities."

Veterans can also enroll in the [National ALS Registry](#) which helps health experts enhance the standards of ALS care and seek a cure.

The VA has 11 Treatment Centers of Excellence that exceed nationally accepted standards of care. To be certified, clinics must meet high level of treatment standards, participate in ALS-related research, and successfully

complete a comprehensive review.

Click here to [Learn about VA Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships](#). For caregiving tips for veterans diagnosed with ALS, visit the [VA Caregiver Support Program](#).



VA ADOPTS NEW ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE STRATEGY TO ENSURE TRUSTWORTHY USE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR VETERAN CARE

As part of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs' efforts to explore the use of artificial intelligence in the delivery of health care and benefits, the VA implemented a new [AI strategy](#) late September, to serve as a guideline for ethical use of the technology throughout its enterprise.

While AI can offer advantages over traditional analytics and clinical decision-making techniques to help improve veteran care, the Department wants to ensure any implementation of the technology is trustworthy and protects veteran information.

"The VA understands the significance of creating a balance between innovation, safety, and trust," said VA National Artificial Intelligence Institute Director Gil Alterovitz, Ph.D. "To this end, VA leadership, practitioners, and relevant end-users will be trained to ensure all AI-related activities and processes are ethical, legal, and meet or exceed standards."

Aligned with the mission of serving veterans and benefiting from the VA's unique data infrastructure, the strategy is designed to deliver on four major strategic objectives:

- Use existing AI to improve outcomes and experiences for veterans.
- Increase VA AI capacity and capabilities.
- Increase veteran and stakeholder trust in AI.
- Build upon VA's existing partnerships across agencies and industry.

"AI has the capability to transform how veterans access the critical care they need," said National AI Initiative Office Director Lynne Parker, Ph. D., with the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. "VA's new roadmap will help realize AI's full potential building trust in future technology and creating more effective, efficient systems for patients."

The development of the comprehensive AI strategy was designed in support of executive orders on AI, National AI Research and Development Strategic Plan, and aligns with the National Artificial Intelligence Initiative Act of 2020 that launched the NAIIO.

Visit [NAII](#) for more information or sign up for the for the latest announcements via [AI@VA Community](#).

SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS INCREASE IN 2022

Approximately 70 million Americans will see a 5.9% increase in their Social Security benefits and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments in 2022. Federal benefit rates increase when the cost-of-living rises, as measured by the Department of Labor's Consumer Price Index (CPI-W).

The CPI-W rises when inflation increases, leading to a higher cost-of-living. This change means prices for goods and services, on average, are a little more expensive, so the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) helps to offset these costs.

Social Security will mail COLA notices throughout the month of December to retirees, survivors, disability beneficiaries, SSI recipients, and representative payees. If anyone wants to know their new benefit amount sooner, they can securely obtain their Social Security COLA notice online using the Message Center in their [my Social Security account](#). This information can be accessed in early December prior to the mailed notice.

Anyone preferring to access their COLA notice online and not receive the mailed notice, can log in to their personal [my Social Security account](#) to opt out of a mailed COLA notice and any other notices that are available online by updating their preferences in the message center.

January 2022 marks other changes that will happen based on the increase in the national average wage index. For example, the maximum amount of earnings subject to Social Security payroll tax in 2022 will be higher. The retirement earnings test exempt amount [will also change in 2022](#).

AMERICAN LEGION POSTS SURPASS GOAL FOR MIDWEST HONOR FLIGHT DONATION

A big Shout Out to South Dakota's American Legion Posts and their members for their commitment to raise funds to support Midwest Honor Flight.

Their goal was to raise \$50,000 and to date they have raised over \$61,000.

This commitment will garner them the opportunity to have a flight dedicated in their honor.



"Bright Spot"

SUICIDE PREVENTION LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

Join partners in suicide prevention to celebrate *Bright Spots*, successful and impactful work going on right here in South Dakota. This learning collaborative will take place virtually monthly. There will be a brief presentation from a partner in South Dakota followed by discussion and networking. This is a great opportunity to learn from various organizations and take back to the communities that you serve so we encourage you to attend all virtual meetings. Access the registration link for **each** session below.

TARGET AUDIENCE:

- + Health professionals (*medical and behavioral*)
- + School personnel (*primary, secondary, post-secondary*)
- + Youth organizations
- + Community prevention organizations
- + Other organizations serving specific populations like Veterans, American Indian, LGBTQ

CEUs AVAILABLE:

1 continuing education contact hour is offered for full attendance at each virtual event to use for educator certification & social worker licensure renewal.

Thursday, October 28, 2021 | 11am-12pm MT/12-1pm CT

Avera Behavioral Health

Taking Zero Suicide to the next level

[Click here to register](#)

Thursday, November 18, 2021 | 11am-12pm MT/12-1pm CT

TBD

Thursday, December 16, 2021 | 11am-12pm MT/12-1pm CT

Lost & Found

Post-secondary school support/Peer2Peer mentoring

[Click here to register](#)



**The schedule for 2022 will be released in November 2021.*



UPCOMING EVENTS

Oct 16—Women Veterans Alliance Event—SD Military Heritage Alliance (1600 W. Russell Street)—Sioux Falls—9:00 am—2:00 pm (CT)
Oct 16—Gallantly Forward 2021 Gala—The Monument—Lacroix Hall—Rapid City—5:00 pm (MT)
Oct 20—South Dakota Veterans Council Meeting—SD Military Heritage Alliance Building (1600 W. Russell)—Sioux Falls—9:00 am (CT)
Oct 23—Midwest Honor Flight Hangar Dance at the South Dakota Military Heritage Alliance (1600 W. Russell Street)—Sioux Falls
Oct 27—Veterans Stand Down—Old High School Gym (301 S. Van Buren)—Winner—10:00 am—2:00 pm (CT)
Nov 11—State Offices Closed
Nov 11—Fallen Hero Bridge Dedication—SSG Gregory Wagner—Hanson High School (600 Juniper Street)—Alexandria—10:00 am (CT)
Nov 13—Northern Hills Veterans Appreciation Fair—Sturgis Community Center (1401 Lazelle Street)—12:00—3:00 pm (MT)
Nov 25-26—State Offices Closed
Dec 7—Governor’s Budget Address
Dec 18—Wreaths Across America—South Dakota Veterans Cemetery—Sioux Falls—11:00 am (CT)
Dec 24—State Offices Closed
Dec 31—State Offices Closed

2022

Jan 10—POW/MIA Chair of Honor Dedication—State Capitol—2:00 pm (CT)
Jan 11—Governor’s State of the State Address
Jun 12—Midwest Honor Flight Annual Honor Ride
Jul 18-23—National Veterans Golden Age Games—Sioux Falls

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